LITTLE YARNS ABOUT FILMS, STARS, PLAYS AND LIFE IN MOVIES

By JAMES W. DEAN.

NEW YORK, Jan. 7.—When Ernst Lubitsch first proposed to make the historical film dramas that have made him an international figure he was greeted with derision and ridicule.

He went ahead with the project. Today at 29 he is hailed as one of the greatest figures in the art of the cinema and as a great actor.

He is self-effacing, almost timid. There is something tragic, sad in his make-up. Your interest in him is almost tantamount to sympathy.

• • •

I went to extend the greetings of the season to Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks just before they left New York. Mary was surrounded by a group of women come for belated interviews. Yet they weren't interviewing her. Mary was just one of a group of women talking over trivial things.

Fairbanks called my attention to that. "You see, they're all acting like old friends," he said. "Mary incites their sympathy. There is something in her make-up that makes other women, some her juniors, want to mother her. I believe that quality which arouses sympathy in others is the real secret of her popularity."

• • •

Many have observed that Chaplin's comedy is of universal appeal because he backgrounds it with pathos. The story that is told by hobo pants and run-down shoes creates sympathy the world over.

• • •

Arbuckle was not a great actor, but he was fat. According to a popular legend, nobody loves a fat man. His appeal was chiefly through sympathy he created by his obesity. The same holds true of Lloyd Hamilton, the other fat comedian.

• • •

Harold Lloyd wears the sort of spectacles that are associated with the highly intellectual. He has a sensitive face. Subjected to slap-stick comedy, he is the object of pity.

• • •

The decline of many former stars has been due to their appearance in roles which in no way appealed to the sympathy of the audience. Others, cast in more favorable roles, did not have that element in their personality that appeals to the sympathy.

Sympathy is a sentiment. Its creation is a matter of emotion more than of thought. There are more emotional people than thinking people. Therefore sympathy created by the personality of the player or by artifices for that purpose is the essential element in the success of acting.

• • •

PRELUDE TO "PENROD."

George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are introduced in a prelude to "Penrod" by Marshall Neilan. He characterizes the prelude as a tribute to the greatest institution of all time—the American boy. It is interesting to note that Neilan states he has not tried to improve upon Tarkington's story. Some film versions of Tarkington stories have been attempts at that—with doleful results.

• • •

NAZIMOVA GOING ABROAD.

Nazimova will go abroad to film Sudermann's "Regina" after she completes "Salome." Alan Hale, who last appeared on the screen with Pauline Frederick in "A Woman in the Case," was Nazimova's leading man in "A Doll's House."

• • •

GISHES MAKE OWN FILM.

Lillian and Dorothy Gish are making a film version of "Her First False Step," the first play in which they appeared together. Mary Pickford began her American career in that. They were all little girls then. The film will be for the entertainment of the Gish family and friends.

• • •

The best illustration of how much a film depends upon its director for interpretation of a story is furnished by the two film versions of "The Little Minister" now current.

Penrhyn Stanlaws directed one picture starring Betty Compson. David Smith directed the other starring Alice Calhoun.

Of course, Edfrid Bingham, who wrote the scenario for the Stanlaws film and C. Graham Baker, who wrote the Smith version, had something to do with the evolution of plot. Yet the handling of story material and players is more evident on the screen than the work of the continuity writer.

Stanlaws is a painter, a student of pictorial composition. "The Little Minister" is the third picture he has directed. Its outstanding feature is its high pictorial quality. Stanlaws has also shown great ability in the development of characters.

Smith is a veteran in the motion picture business. The outstanding feature of his film is action. The latter half of the picture is enacted in a heavy snow storm with lightning flashes lending a bizarre effect to the action.

Smith disregarded the fact that he had in Miss Calhoun one of the most beautiful women of the screen. He subordinated a play upon her personality to a play for sensationalism in action.

On the other hand Stanlaws apparently did his utmost to capitalize on the personality of Betty Compson. In some epoisdes she falls short of the specifications for the part. In others she performs capably. It is evident that she was more or less of an automaton in Stanlaws' hands. He has stamped his own individuality on this film and on the players.

• • •

THE STORY SOURCES

There has been much speculation as to the film rights to "The Little Minister" since two versions are appearing simultaneously. Stanlaws made his for Paramount. Smith's was for Vitagraph.

In an "omnibus" contract Paramount bought from Charles Frohman, Inc., screen rights to all Barrie plays staged by that concern. Among them were "Sentimental Tommy," "What Every Woman Knows," "The Little Minister" and "Peter Pan."

Vitagraph had previously purchased screen rights to the book version of "The Little Minister" and made a film based on the story a number of years ago.

• • •

A NEW FRECKLED STAR

Wesley Barry has been outfreckled at last. The new freckle king is Richard Daniels, a youngster introduced in the Vitagraph version of "The Little Minister."

Richard gives the best juvenile performance this writer has ever seen on the screen. It appears that he acted naturally before the camera, that he displayed all of his emotions unabashed by his surroundings.

This naturalism probably should be credited to the director. It appeared to have been achieved more through the handling of the boy than through the boy's acting ability.

• • •

LADY GODIVA'S RIDE

The film version of "Lady Godiva" will be released early in February. This quotation is taken from the announcement of its release: "The story of Lady Godiva, who was forced by her arrogant husband to disrobe and ride a white horse through the streets in order to save the townsfolks from oppression, has been delicately handled, yet retaining all the power of Lord Tennyson's work." The censors will probably decide whether it was handled with delicacy or with power. It could hardly have been handled with both.

• • •

Greater entertainment is often furnished by news reels, comics, scenics and other short real subjects than by featured films on theatre programs.

Therefore, I believe that they are worthy of treatment similar to that given featured films. Those who have produced the best of such subjects should be accorded the recognition given producers of feature photodramas.

No one person can see all the film produced in one year. Time will not allow it even if the strain on the eyes did not forbid it. I see about 50,000 feet of film a week, 10,000 of which is made up of comedies and other short features.

The following list of what I consider the ten best short features of 1921 is limited to those films which I have personally seen. Order of arrangement is without regard to relative merit. A basis of comparison is not possible because of the diversity of types. The list:

"Never Weaken," Lloyd comedy.
"The Playhouse," Keaton comedy.
"The Four Seasons," Kineto review.
"Funny Face Comedies."
"Marsh Studies," scenic.
Tony Sarg's screen marionettes.
"The Northern Trail," short drama.
Pathe News reel of Russian famine.
"The Bashful Suitor."

Slow motion of Snowy Baker's fall.

"Never Weaken" was a comedy that contained the satirical element in a large measure. "The Playhouse" offered the best example of humor gained through technical and mechanical effects.

"The Four Seasons" was more than a scenic. It presented the drama of nature.

Tony Sarg's marionettes present satirical comedy in unadulterated pantomime. The mechanical figures in the "Funny Face" comedies do everything but talk.

"Marsh Studies," photographed by John Wallace Gillies, contains more color than anything I have ever seen in black and white.

"The Northern Trail" proves that a photodrama can be completely produced in two reels. It contained more action than is usually put in a five-reel feature.

"The Bashful Suitor" is one of the series of two-reel plays based on famous paintings. They provide entertainment of a high order and education at the same time.

The news reel is one of the greatest factors of the age in educating the masses. The Pathe record of the Russian famine is a fine example of the enterprise that is evidenced in showing one-half of the world how the other half lives.

Slow-motion photography is a great innovation. It teaches things the eye cannot discern. It reveals things never before included in the comprehension of man. The reel showing the fall of Snowy Baker is chosen for a place in the list because of the dramatic thrill it created by sustaining the action of the accident. It was a "Screen Snapshot."

Other interesting contributions of short subjects during the past year were "La Fontaine's Fairy Tales," "Aesop's Fables," "Adventures of Bill and Bob," Marcus' "What a Little Hair Will Do," Hy Mayer's "Travelaughs," Grantland Rice's sport reels, nature studies included in the Kineto Reviews and Pathe Reviews and the various scenics.

• • •

Fannie Hurst says an injustice was done to her by the film called "Star Dust" and that she will spend the $30,000 paid her for film rights to the novel of that name in fighting the exhibition of the film under that title.

But that's not the end of it. The Hope Hamilton Productions company, producers of the film, has filed action against Miss Hurst for $250,000 damages because of statements she made about the film.

There's a joke in all of this to this writer. Both Miss Hurst and the film are getting valuable advertising through their squabble.

This article, however, is not intended for an advertisement. The question is—how far should a producer go in changing the printed story when it is converted into films?

THE TWO VERSIONS.

I have read the novel version of "Star Dust." I arranged for a special screening of the film for comparison. The title reads, "'Star Dust,' suggested by Fannie Hurst's novel of that name."

Soon after the introduction of characters the film story departs from the novel version. If you read the novel and liked it you will not like the film. If you didn't relish the novel, you'll enjoy the film.

I was highly entertained by the film. It is not a masterpiece, but it is better than the average film of today.

In the picture the heroine leaves Paradise, Iowa, after her marriage to an uncouth hick. Her troubles accumulate. Her baby dies. She plans suicide. Thwarted in that, she finds life opening into more pleasant channels. She becomes an operatic prima donna.

The husband hurrying to share in her glory and her wealth is killed in a train wreck—the most thrilling I have ever seen on the screen.

Husband eliminated, the girl with the soul of an artist finds love and happiness in a marriage with a song writer.

The film story, compared to that of the novel, leaves a pleasanter taste in the mouth. It is doubtful if any motion picture censor in the country would have passed the film had it been produced in strict adherence to the novel story.

In the novel the baby lives and the mother goes on to the bitter end slaving for the child.

The photoplay is not the medium for the expression of literature. Some authors realize this. Others do not. There are few authors today who specify in their contracts that their stories are not to be changed. Most of them are glad to have them accepted for the screen because they receive a greater price for them than they could get upon any other market.

This may not be so with Fannie Hurst. Her writings have made her independent financially. However, the film "Humoresque" without doubt brought her to the attention of the masses more than all of her writings combined. That film did not follow the story, "Humoresque."

Well, should a producer change the story when he converts it to the screen? If it does not fall within the limitations of the screen and within the limitations of censorship, he must change it.

• • •

HOPE HAMILTON'S WORK.

This writer once saw a miserable film in which Hope Hamilton was starred. He thought her case was hopeless. In "Star Dust" she does as fine a bit of work as any feminine star has given to the screen in months. She shows she understands pantomime. She has come a long way in the last year and promises to go a long way further in the next year.

• • •

It was Christmas Eve. A newsboy not yet nine, was on his way home. His day's sales had netted him 90 cents.

A man stopped him. "Want to earn a quarter?" he asked. "Sure!" "Run over to Third avenue and get my overcoat—wait a minute. How do I know you'll come back with the coat?" For answer the boy gave him his 90 cents to hold as bond.

The boy couldn't find the tailor shop. He returned. The man was gone. So was the 90 cents.

That Christmas Eve was 43 years ago.

• • •

This Christmas Eve a little man stood in an office overlooking Times Square. He was in a building named after him. Below, on Broadway, his name was displayed to the world in electric lights. The sign read "Loew's State."

The little newsy who was cheated of the returns of a long day's work in the cold was Marcus Loew. Today there's a theatre bearing the Loew name on almost every Broadway in America.

• • •

"That was my first lesson in the ways of the world," Loew told me. (How similar to that of Benjamin Franklin when he paid too much for his whistle!)

"When I was nine I left school," he went on. "I worked for 35 cents a day in a map-making plant. I lost that job when I led a strike among the boys for 40 cents.

"When I was 11 I published a weekly newspaper. I solicited the ads and edited the paper by clipping news from the big dailies.

"I next went to work in a furnishing goods store for a relative. I worked from six in the morning until 10:30 at night and midnight on Saturdays.

"I left that job after I was given only half an hour for lunch on the day I was confirmed. I went to work for a concern employing my two older brothers. One had charge of the fur trimmings, the other of the dress trimmings. When I was 16 I was superintendent and boss of them both.

"I started a fur business of my own when I was 18. I failed when I was 19. I scraped together $6,000. I didn't pay so much on the dollar. I paid in full those who came to collect first. Then I still owed $1800. I worked as a salesman for $25 a week. It took me four years to pay that debt. And all the time I was courting. I wouldn't get married until I was free of debt.

"That failure was my real start. When I went into business again I was known as an honest man. I received more credit than I was entitled to."

• • •

Twenty-five years ago Loew owned property next to some owned by David Warfield, the noted actor. Warfield was a better actor than business man. Loew told him that others were imposing on him. Before long Marcus had assumed a control over Warfield's property so complete that he wouldn't allow Dave to go near it. That marked the beginning of one of the most unusual friendships in the United States. Warfield and Loew eat lunch together every day that both are in town. They are so much together that they are often referred to as Damon and Pythias.

• • •

It was Warfield who induced Loew to enter the show business. Loew started with a penny arcade in New York. That was 16 years ago. Then he bought one on Fountain Square, Cincinnati.

One day Loew went across the Ohio River to Covington, Ky. He saw his first movie there. It was in a private house. After the owner had filled the house with children he locked the doors so none could sneak in—and none could have escaped in case of fire. The owner operated the projector and lectured as the film unrolled. "There, he hit him. Ah, the villan is dead!" He told what had happened after the audience had already seen it.

Loew telegraphed to New York for a machine and some film. He partitioned off 28 feet of his penny arcade and rented chairs from an undertaker. His first theatre cost him $150. Almost 5000 attended the first day.

• • •

Loew built 27 theatres the past year. They cost from one to six millions each.

"How many theatres do you own now?" I asked him.

"One hundred and thirty odd," he answered.

"Don't you know exactly?"

"It's either 133 or 134."

• • •

A gray fringe around a shining pate. Eyes a bit bleary through big glasses. A gray brush above the lip and above each eye. More nose than chin.

Scarcely more than five feet tall, he is almost lost behind a cluttered desk. The office is paneled in mahogany. Looks like a feudal castle.

Voice rough, but not strong. A drab suit and a dull gray tie emphasize an almost colorless personality. Where is the Napoleonic spark in this man?

On his desk are three photographs. Two are of his twin sons, Arthur and David. The other of David's little daughter.

You call attention to them. Then you see the spark. Percentages, theaters, businesses are gone. He hitches up to the desk.

"The finest boys in the world! Their feet set square. They live within their incomes. Not foolish frills for them. No father could be prouder of his boys than I am of them."

• • •

"What is your formula for success?" I asked Loew.

"Be ambitious. If you sell papers try to sell more than the fellow who sells the most. Always have someone in mind whose record you want to beat.

"Be honest. Give the other fellow more than he asks you to give. You'll get it back later on.

"And make every failure a gain, make it serve as a lesson for future action."

• • •

Ernest Lubitsch may be the great German moving director—and he may not. However, I am convinced after one hour's session with him that he is the greatest German diplomat who has landed upon our fair shores in many a moon.

I asked him seven times in seven various ways whether he thought American pictures measured up to German pictures in story worth, and I know no more of what he thinks on that score than I did before—except from deduction.

I deduce from his evasion of a direct answer to that question that he thinks—well, you make your own deductions.

Lubitsch speaks nary a word of English. I understand not a word of German except "Verboten" and a few other words that were generously used in war propaganda. Our meeting was nothing like a kaffee-klatsch. Verbal intercourse was through the medium of an interpreter.

LUBITSCH'S VIEWS

Having no direct quotations I present here Luhitsch's views on the movies as he revealed them in answers through the interpreter.

Germany pictures provide entertainment in America because they are different from the American pictures. American pictures provide entertainment in Germany because they are different from Germany pictures. If Germany continues to make the same kind of pictures and America keeps on with its present kind, entertainment will be provided for everybody. (That sounds reasonable.)

Chaplin is the greatest comedian in the world. (Germany has just found this out.)

The remarkable thing about American pictures is the attention paid to detail. In "Forbidden Fruit" the entire story was summed up in the situation in which the heroine looked to one side and saw beautiful flowers and looking to the other side saw the worn coat and a sloppy hat of her husband.

"Broken Blossoms" impressed Lubitsch more than any other American film. (It was a tragedy.)

The only film Lubitsch has seen since coming to American is "A Sailor-Made Man," starring Harold Lloyd. He laughed at that until his sides ached.

Although Germans consider music their national art they are far behind America in the matter of musical presentation of pictures.

Lubitsch believes that some day a picture will be made which will not even require a title or subtitle to tell its story, that in the next generation some person will evolve a method of picture presentation that will give him equal rank in history with Shakespeare, that the true medium of cinema expression is something apart from literature, drama or portraiture, that the main element in photoplays as they are made today is drama.

Those last views of Lubitsch were in response to very specific questions. When he perceived that his questioner was in accord with him he waved his arms, poured forth a mass of guttural vowels and thick consonants.

The interpreter interpreted. Lubitsch smiled. I smiled. We shook hands and parted—very good friends.

• • •

THIS MAN LUBITSCH

Black hair brushed compactly against a low, long cranium. Elephantine ears joined far back on the head. Dark eyes in dark circles. An olive cast to the skin. Aquiline nose. Lips that would be a cupid's bow were they not compressed so tightly.

Except for the size and position of the ears that head would be out of place on a Teuton body. It belongs on the frame of a Sicilian tragedian.

A flowered starched collar and shirt. Purple tie in untidy four-in-hand. Rough gray suit of severely plain cut. Thick hands and wrists. Thighs and calves that bulge the trousers. Shoes, about size six, black and the upper half laced through hooks. The body, except for the feet, that of a wrestler.

And that man is an actor as well as a director, a protege of Max Reinhardt. He is master of pantomime off the screen as well as on it. An interview with him would not be entirely for naught if not one word were understood. He talks with his hands, his features and his body.

• • •

"FOOLISH WIVES' 'READY

At last a date has been set for the release of Eric Von Stroheim's "Foolish Wives." That will be January 11 and Universal is in hopes that it will be a big box office success. It will have to be if it is not a great loss, for the film cost $1,103,736.38. The 38 cents is reported to have been reimbursement to an extra who lost that much while working in a scene.

• • •

DEAL FOR "MAIN STREET"

More negotiations have been started by producers to buy the film rights to "Main Street" from the Shuberts, who are producing the stage version of Sinclair Lewis' best seller. A screen version may not be made until road and stock companies have established a wider reputation for the play.

• • •

The most artistic development of the motion picture in the year just drawing to a close is the series of two-reel dramas based on famous paintings.

This, because portraiture is the basic element of the photoplay. Those who believe literature the basic element of the motion picture may disagree.

However, a masterpiece of brush and paint tells its story largely by suggestion. It calls upon the imagination of the beholder to supplement action and make the story complete—to interpret the motive and the spirit of the hand that created the work of art.

Thus a painting calls upon the imagination probably more than any other form of art.

The best photoplays yet made are the ones that have commanded the imagination of the audience.

Imagination is a latent factor in the make-up of many movie patrons. They don't believe there's any Santa Claus, or that communication with Mars will ever be effected, or that the gun's loaded.

These photoplays based on famous paintings are graphic lessons in imagining. If you don't know how to imagine, go and see one of them. Then you'll know why some persons stop in an art gallery to look at one painting for many long moments—they've set their imaginations to work and are fascinated by the pastime.

The first of the series, "The Beggar Maid," was a beautiful adaptation of the Burns-Jones painting represented the adaptation of a written story to portraiture and thence to motion pictures.

The second of the series has just been released. It is "The Bashful Suitor," based on the famous painting of Josef Israels which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This writer believes it is a more artistic production than "The Beggar Maid." That may be because it has been transferred but once from the original expression of theme and the photoplay is simply the addition of action to portraiture.

Israels painted a Dutch boy and girl stopping in the middle of a pasture, the boy to the rear of the girl. He called this work "The Bashful Suitor" and left the other details of the story to the imagination of the beholder.

Thus Herbert Blache, the director, and Lejaren a Hiller, the art director, in making a photoplay based on the story are simply telling the audience what they imagined when they beheld the painting.

They imagined a very good job of it. And whoever selected Mary Brandon as The Girl, Pierre Gendron as The Boy and W. A. Otten as the painter did another good job.

This writer has never seen any of the three in pictures before and it has been a long time since he has seen three players as good in one film.

• • •

Ben Turpin has been asked to discontinue the use of crossed eyes in his comedies. The Stringtown Opthalmic society protests that his use of crossed-focus orbs suggests the inefficacy of eye surgeons. This causes deep despair among all cross-eyed persons. Also among the eye surgeons.

• • •

FILM COURSE AT COLUMBIA.

The course in motion picture production at Columbia university has proven so popular that it will be continued another term. The original plan was to hold the course for one term of three months. The Fox studio is used for practical instruction.